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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: BERRI CLAIMS MARCH 14 PERFIDY, HINTS AT TIME BUT
LITTLE FLEXIBILITY

REF: A. BEIRUT 3652

[1](#)B. STATE 184145

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (S) In a 11/18 meeting with the Ambassador, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri portrayed himself as the only adult amidst squabbling, selfish children. He claimed success twice already in preventing street demonstrations. Yet his attempts to find a way out of Lebanon's political mess was undermined when MP Saad Hariri and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora betrayed him -- Hariri by backing out of a deal to trade approval of the special tribunal for a blocking minority in the cabinet, and Siniora by breaking a promise to wait three more days before tabling the tribunal documents before the cabinet. Berri claimed to remain personally opposed to street action, but, so far, the March 14 leaders had given him nothing workable to convince Hizballah and Michel Aoun to back down. He rejected a compromise proposed by Siniora (ref A) as too little, too late. Berri undermined his vow of support for the special tribunal by repeatedly noting Hizballah's need to understand the details.

[1](#)2. (S) After threatening that it is sometimes better to build a new house than fix an old one beyond repair, Berri's own cabinet compromise sounded suspiciously similar to Berri's opening position: a blocking minority in the current cabinet. Perhaps, Berri conceded, that blocking minority could offer guarantees not to trigger a cabinet collapse, if those squabbling children would agree to a larger understanding encompassing a broad range of issues ahead of time. Berri seemed to be hinting that more time was possible to broker a deal but that he had little flexibility to offer on substance. While expressing bitterness against Siniora in particular, Berri expressed solidarity with the PM regarding Lebanon's Independence Day on November 22: if, as some predict, President Emile Lahoud blocks Siniora's participation in the official commemoration, Berri, too, will stay away. Berri expressed delight over the possibility of visiting the United States (ref B) but, asking that any invitation be deferred for now, said that he needed to keep cooking in the Lebanon kitchen. End summary and comment.

THE FURY OF A SPEAKER SCORNE

[1](#)3. (S) Berri spent most of the unusually long meeting (75 minutes -- keeping berobed Shia clerics cooling their heels

in his waiting room) on a detailed, blow-by-blow, day-by-day, insult-by-insult review of the lead-up to the resignation of the five Shia ministers a week ago (11/11). As Berri's account would tire even the most indefatigable readers of our cables, we will summarize it here: both Saad Hariri and Fouad Siniora are not to be trusted. Both shamelessly betrayed the Speaker, who had always offered them the hand of genuine partnership. In Saad's case, he offered a deal to Berri and Mohammed Raad (representing Hizballah) on the margins of the 11/9 consultations: if March 8 and Aoun will commit to the special tribunal, then March 14 will concede to the March 8-Aoun demand for a one-third-plus-one blocking minority in a reshaped cabinet. To Berri's professed shock, by Saturday that deal was off the table, with Samir Ja'ja', not Saad, conveying the bad news. How, Berri asked, can he trust Saad again. He is not serious; he is not mature. And, no, Hariri had not asked to visit Berri since Berri's return from Teheran, although Berri will receive him if asked.

¶4. (S) Siniora's sins seemed to loom larger in Berri's mind. Siniora repeated his mistake of December 12, 2005. Then -- the day of Gebran Tueni's assassination and the cabinet discussion on whether to ask the UN to set up a special tribunal -- Berri had asked Siniora to postpone discussion from Monday to Thursday, so that he would have time to work the issue with "my allies" (i.e., Hizballah). Siniora refused, and Berri had no choice but to go along with the Shia cabinet walk-out that lasted seven weeks. This time, Siniora did not call Berri until 7 p.m. on Friday (11/10), ten hours after he first received the draft tribunal documents from UN envoy Geir Pedersen. Compounding his mistakes, the PM did not convey the texts to Berri until three hours later. Berri then extracted a promise from Siniora to delay the cabinet meetnig until the following Thursday (11/16), after Berri's return from Teheran, so that

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Berri had time, again, to get Hizballah on board. Imagine the shock, Berri said, when he learned in the 11/11 consultative session that, despite his promise to Berri, Siniora had deviously proceeded to schedule the tribunal debate on Monday. While Siniora had asked to see Berri after Berri's return, Berri said that he is refusing to give "that politically stupid man" an appointment.

HOPING, FOR A THIRD TIME,
TO STOP STREET PROTESTS

¶5. (S) What is sad, Berri said, is that he already prevented Hizballah and Aounist forces from launching massive street demonstrations twice in recent weeks: once on August 14 and once after Ramadan. Both times, Berri found an excuse that Hassan Nasrallah and Michel Aoun could not refuse, most recently in his post-Ramadan call for a round of consultations. Both Hizballah and Aoun were annoyed with him for his delaying tactics. Vowing that he remained opposed to street demonstrations, he said that, nevertheless, if Hizballah and Aoun insist on them, "then you will see Amal, too." Now, with March 8-Aoun calling for street demonstrations and March 14 calling for counter demonstrations, Berri wants to find a way out. But no one on March 14 is giving him anything to work with. "Put something in my hand," Berri said, something that he can sell to Hizballah and Aoun.

SINIORA'S COMPROMISE UNACCEPTABLE;
HIZBALLAH, AOUN WANT ALL NEW CABINET

¶6. (S) The Ambassador raised Siniora's proposal for a 30-member cabinet. As explained in ref A, that proposal, by reserving two ministerial slots for "neutral" figures who would not vote in critical cases, denied the majority the two-thirds and the minority the blocking one-third-plus-one. Each side could claim victory, making it a reasonable

compromise. Berri shook his head: it violates the Taif accord and the constitution to have two ministers who refrain from voting; it throws the whole confessional balance off kilter. Berri does not want to set the precedent of fiddling with Taif. Moreover, Hizballah and Michel Aoun have now raised the stakes, wanting Siniora thrown out and an entirely new cabinet formed. What might have been possible two weeks ago is no longer acceptable to Hizballah and Michel Aoun, who feel that they will prevail and do not need to settle for little. They want Siniora out altogether. Sometimes, Berri said, it is easier to build a new house than to try to restore an old house that is beyond repair.

BERRI TRIES TO PUT A SHINE ON
MARCH 8-AOUN'S ORIGINAL DEMAND

17. (S) Pressed by the Ambassador, Berri said that, given sufficient ammunition, he thought he could still sell the one-third-plus-one blocking minority to Hizballah and Aoun, despite their shared desire for much more. Berri argued that, in general, Lebanon's cabinets operate by consensus anyway, so the majority would not behave much differently than it had from July 2005 until now under such a scenario. Disagreeing, the Ambassador asked why March 14 should surrender to having the threat of cabinet collapse (triggered when one-third-plus-one of the ministers of any cabinet submit their resignation) over their heads. That problem, Berri said, could be resolved: by agreeing ahead of time on major national issues -- which Berri listed as UNSCR 1701 implementation, the special tribunal, an election law, and economic/institutional reform needed for Paris III to succeed -- then the danger of a cabinet resignation will be avoided. Suggesting that he knows such an agreement would take a long time, Berri said that he could come up with "guarantees" to March 14 that the one-third-plus-one minority will not be used to trigger the cabinet collapse. As for the presidency, Berri said that he is more eager than anyone to kick Emile Lahoud out of Baabda Palace, "but you need to help us with the Syrians -- get the Syrians to agree."

ARE THE TRIBUNAL, 1701 THE REAL ISSUES?

18. (S) The Ambassador said that he did not understand Berri's position: if the cabinet would operate always by consensus and the blocking minority willingly gives up its

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right to topple the cabinet, then March 8-Aoun should settle for the Siniora compromise. The practical results would be the same, and the current turmoil would end, to everyone's relief. There is no reason to frighten the population with talk of demonstrations. In considering Berri's position, the Ambassador said that he could not help but conclude that the real motivation of March 8, probably scripted by Syria, was to prevent the tribunal and further implementation of UNSCR 1701. "Who said I oppose the tribunal?" Berri asked, describing himself as "the first" to back the concept. Expressing strong support for UNIFIL's stabilizing role and economic benefits, he claimed to be one of the many proud fathers who lent genetic material to the birth of UNSCR 1701.

Asked by the Ambassador how deep the Syrian opposition really is to the tribunal, Berri said that he does not, and will not, speak for Damascus. During what turned into a lengthy debate over the tribunal and his claims of support for it, Berri said repeatedly that, while Hizballah also supported the concept of the tribunal, it was only reasonable that Hizballah would want to study the details.

SHOWING SOLIDARITY WITH SINIORA
ON INDEPENDENCE DAY

19. (S) The Ambassador asked Berri whether he would participate in Lebanon's official commemoration of

Independence Day on November 22. Yes, Berri said, but only if Siniora were included. Despite being furious with Siniora (and scrupulously dodging the Ambassador's questions about whether he considered Siniora to be a fully empowered sitting prime minister), Berri said that it is tradition for all three of Lebanon's "presidents" to participate. Lebanon's confessional balance requires it. If Lahoud, to reinforce his argument that Siniora's cabinet is illegal, denies Siniora a place in the Baabda Palace receiving line, then Berri will boycott, too. But Berri did not expect Lahoud to "go that far."

DEFERRING A WASHINGTON INVITATION

110. (S) As the meeting came to a close as nervous aides entered the room with increasing frequency to tap their watches, the Ambassador told Berri that he concluded that the Speaker is looking for ways to buy more time, in hopes of avoiding street demonstrations. Berri nodded. Drawing on ref B, the Ambassador asked whether Berri would therefore find a trip to Washington to be tactically useful. If Berri wants, we can consider an invitation. Maybe the announcement of a trip to Washington could provide him the pretext to convince people to avoid the street, as people will want to hear about his U.S. consultations before plotting their next moves. Berri expressed delight with the idea but asked that any invitation be deferred for now. "Let's keep this idea between you and me." The time is not right, he said, claiming that he needed to "keep cooking in the Lebanese kitchen."

COMMENT

111. (S) To believe Berri's feelings are as bruised by Hariri and Siniora's betrayals as he claims, one would also be required to buy the argument that Berri trusted anyone but Berri in the first place. His refusal to receive Siniora is probably linked to Syria's orders to discredit the PM more than to Berri's hurt. (And we wonder if he will be able to maintain his Independence Day solidarity with Siniora, if Lahoud blocks Siniora's participation in the official ceremonies.) Reading between the lines and monitoring his body language and public remarks, we believe that Berri has started to gain some traction in convincing Hizballah and Aoun -- and perhaps Syria and Iran -- to wait before blowing up Lebanon. But we do not see any flexibility on the substance of the political debate. His comments on needing a "new house" rather than a "restored house" correspond with other reports that Hizballah and Aoun are hardening their positions. On Berri's part, we suspect that this is all bluffing in an attempt to make the "one-third-plus-one" blocking minority demand look reasonable. His comments about Hizballah's need to study the details of the tribunal documents -- when we know that Minister of Justice Charles Rizk has scrupulously kept Hizballah informed of each tribunal development -- are ominous. While we don't want to exaggerate the length of Berri's leash tethering him to his

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more powerful Hizballah allies, we hope that the visible delight he expressed at the suggestion of an possible invitation to Washington will help bolster his resolve to seek a solution short of street demonstrations.

FELTMAN